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Tragic Passion, Romantic Eloquence, and Betrayal in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*

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Abstract: This paper investigates the themes of tragic eroticism, romantic eloquence and betrayal in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*. The paper is an in-depth analysis of the monumental tragic consequences of the incest passion that flares between a coquettish, seductive woman and her stepson, and the romantic rhetoric both use while entrapped in their sexual ecstasy. The paper traces the moves and breaths of the two infatuated lovers before, while and after they commit the sin of incest, and attempts to measure their romantic rhetoric against such incestuous lust. The two lovers' incest takes place in an ominous house teeming with family tensions, intense lust, hatred, and betrayal.
Keywords: *Desire Under the Elms*; Eugene O'Neill; passion; eroticism; rhetoric; eloquence; incest; betrayal

In *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), a domestic peasant tragedy set in New England, Eugene O'Neill portrays the grave consequences of the tragic incestuous passion that flares between a coquettish, seductive, young woman and her stepson. Abbie Putnam, a newly widowed young woman and is now old Cabot's third wife, is a wicked, lusty, and extremely beautiful woman. O'Neill portrays her as a woman who has a captivating and sexy figure full of lust, "Abbie is thirty-five, buxom, full of vitality" with a sensual face revealing her intense lust, "Her round face is pretty, but marred by its rather gross sensuality" (*Desire Under the Elms* 335). Hartman remarks that Abbie embodies the "eternal earth spirit in whom all streams of desire converge" (361). Abbie is a vivacious woman who lives only on life's physical level, and once she tries to live on the spiritual level, she destroys others and destroys herself as well. In marrying an old man, the age of her father and maybe against her will, she was planning to seize the farmhouse and disinherit her stepsons.

From the very first moment she sees her youngest stepson Eben, Abbie becomes sexually attracted to him. In their first encounter Abbie flirtatiously ogles Eben's sexy body, and he unconsciously returns her looks. Incestuous lust immediately captivates Abbie and Eben, and O'Neill's stage directions in this scene reveal how they become sexually attracted to each other:

> For a moment she stands looking at Eben. He does not notice her at first. Her eyes take him in penetratingly with a calculating appraisal of his strength as against hers. But under this her desire is dimly awakened by his youth and good looks. Suddenly he becomes conscious of her

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presence and looks up. Their eyes meet. He leaps to his feet, glowering at her speechlessly (*Desire Under the Elms* 338).

Whenever Abbie sees Eben, she moves towards him coquettishly, and speaks to him in a seductive tone to seduce him. At first, she convinces him that she will take his mother's place. Unable to hide her admiration of his handsome face and erotic body, Abbie tells Eben that she will not play the role of his mother as he is too big and strong for that. Instead she will befriend him, "I don't want t' pretend playin' Maw t' ye, Eben. Ye're too big an' too strong fur that. I want t' be fren's with ye."(*Desire Under the Elms* 338). Eben is loyal to the memory of his dead mother, and treats Abbie as a conqueror of his mother's place and even a vanisher of her memory in the house. From the moment Abbie steps into the farm house, Eben, though he has a strong sexual desire for her, realizes that she is an intruder who seeks to rob him of his inheritance. As they both wish to take hold on the farm, they initially mistrust each other, insult one another, but their sexual tension and cruelty to each other ease the moment they start to become physically attracted to each other.

Eben is aware of the trick Abbie is playing on his old father, and he scornfully tells her that he is quite sure that she married him just to take hold on the farm, "An'[my father] bought yew –like a harlot! An' the price he's payin' ye-this farm" (*Desire Under the Elms* 339). Abbie, defiantly, admits that she indeed married his old father to seize the farm, and nobody can prevent her from doing that, "Waal – what if I did need a hum? What else'd I marry an old man like him fur?" (*Desire Under the Elms* 339). Abbie, with a confident laugh, teases Eben, "This be my farm-this be my hum-this be my kitchen!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 339). Then she coquettishly walks up to him, her face and body burning with desire, points to the abandoned parlor of Eben's dead mother, and teasingly says to him, "An' upstairs-that be my bedroom-an' my bed!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 339). Swarming with desire, Abbie utilizes her artifice of temptation to arouse Eben's latent sexuality. She erotically lays her hand on his arm, and tenderly offers him a friendly initiative, "Let's yew 'n' me be fren's, Eben" (*Desire Under the Elms* 339). Powerless to control his growing lust for her irresistible sensuality and coquettish movements, Eben gives in to Abbie's desire for a moment before he recovers her true image in his mind as a usurper of his mother's place and his farm. Then, he wrathfully hurls off her arm, rebukes her, and rushes furiously out of the door fighting against the conflicting feelings of amounting attraction towards and repulsion for his stepmother.

Incapable of hiding her desire for his sensual body, Abbie likens Eben to a strong bull, "Ye look all slicked up like a prize bull" (*Desire Under the Elms* 341). Eben replies resentfully, though still hypnotized by her charming beauty, "Waal- ye hain't so durned purty yerself, be ye?" (*Desire Under the Elms* 341). They lustfully ogle each other's bodies, and their eyes glow possessively at each other as if wanting to penetrate the flesh of each other. Their desire becomes a palpable force flapping in the hot air. Abbie is sure that Eben is captivated by a tantalizing desire for her sexy body, and she can feel this in every move he makes and every word he utters. She tells him that in suppressing his desire for her, he would be acting against his nature since she can feel desire flooding from his voluptuous eyes:

> Ye don't mean that, Eben. Ye may think ye mean it, mebbe, but ye don't. Ye can't. It's agin nature, Eben. Ye been fightin' yer nature ever since the day I come-tryin' t' tell yerself I hain't purty t' ye (*Desire Under the Elms:* 341-42).

Mesmerized in her spell, Eben cautiously takes a step towards her. Abbie continues seducing him making use of her art of temptation, "Nature'll beat ye, Eben" (*Desire Under the Elms* 342). Having retrieved her image in his mind as an intruder and a ravisher of the sweet memories of his mother, Eben breaks from the spell of her lust, and resentfully accuses her of marrying his father to take hold of the farm, "Ye've made such a damned idjit [idiot] out o' the old devil" (*Desire Under the Elms* 342). He defies her that he will never give up his mother's farm, "I'm fightin' him- fightin' yew- fightin' fur Maw's rights t' her hum!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 342). Eben teases Abbie and drives her crazy when he tells her that he is going to see Minnie. Abbie, staggering with jealousy, tells Eben that Minnie is an ugly old slut. Eben, mockingly, replies, "Mebbe- but she's better'n yew. She don't go sneakin' an' stealin' – what's mine" (*Desire Under the Elms* 343). Burning with jealousy, Abbie inquires, "What d'ye want t' waste time on her fur?" and Eben ironically answers back by reiterating her words "Ye can't beat Nature, didn't ye say? (*Desire Under the Elms* 342).Unable to hide her jealousy, Abbie reproaches him for

intending to visit Minnie's brothel, "Git out o' my sight! Go on t' yer slut- disgracin' yer Paw 'n' me!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 343). She cautions him that if he goes to see the whore, she will urge his father to drive him out of the house, "I'll git yer Paw t' horsewhip ye off the place if I want t'! Ye're only livin' here 'cause I tolerate ye!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 343).

Abbie uses all tricks available to ensnare Eben; by seducing him and threatening to disinherit him and banish him out of the house. Her deception, wickedness and desire for Eben peak when she untruthfully reports to old Cabot that Eben has made improper advances towards her, "An' his lust fur me! Kin ye find excuses fur that?" (*Desire Under the Elms* 345). Then, Abbie tells him frankly that her stepson has indeed sexually harassed her "He was tryin' t' make love t' me when ye heerd us quarrellin'" (*Desire Under the Elms* 345). To intensify the old man's hatred for his son, Abbie tells him that Eben has even threatened her to cast her off the house, " So that's the thanks I git fur marryin' ye- t' have ye change kind to Eben who hates ye, an' talk o' turnin' me out in the road" (*Desire Under the Elms* 345). Cabot becomes infuriated and swears that the moment he sees spineless Eben he will shoot him, "By the A'mighty God- I'll end him! I'll git the shotgun an' blow his soft brains t' the top o' them elums!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 345-46).

Frightened for Eben, Abbie begs forgiveness for his rudeness, "No! Don't ye!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 345). Then, Abbie, coquettishly putting her arms around him, calms Cabot down by telling him that Eben was just showing his affection for amusement without any serious intention, "Listen, Ephraim. T'wa'n't nothin' bad- on'y a boy's foolin' –t'wa'n't meant serious- jest jokin' an' teasin'" (*Desire Under the Elms* 346). When Cabot questions her, "Then why did ye say- lust?" Abbie resorts once again to her art of lying and makes another strong justification for her lie, "It must hev sounded wusser'n I meant. An' I was mad at thinkin' – ye'd leave him the farm" (*Desire Under the Elms* 346). When Cabot threatens to "horsewhip him off the place" to make her satisfied, Abbie gets offended and begs him to make him stay in the house convincing him that Eben is the only son left who can help him on the farm, "Ye mustn't drive him off. T'ain't sensible. Who'll ye get to help ye on the farm? They's no one hereabouts" (*Desire Under the Elms* 346).

It is quite ironical that both Cabot and Eben patronize the same local prostitute. Though Eben hates his father for his immorality and sensuality, he himself is immoral and corrupt. He keeps visiting a whorehouse to sleep with the same prostitute his father sleeps with. He is involved in an incestuous love affair with his stepmother and fathers a son by her, thus disgracing himself and the entire family. Eben even takes after his father in some aspects of his personality. Both are lusty, deceitful, infidel, rash, stubborn, vengeful, and arrogant. Above all they are both the victims of seething animal passions. Their conflict over the possession of both the farm and the mother, the catalyst Abbie, and the incestuous relationship between the son and his stepmother all result in a great tragedy.

The stock oedipal conflict between father and son over the possession of the mother runs throughout the course of *Desire Under the Elms* and takes different shapes, all of which culminate in the tragic destruction of the house and its dwellers. Hartman (1961) views the incestuous love affair that unites Abbie and Eben as a tragic involvement in the mother-image (361). Hartman argues that the oedipal desire for the mother is ruinous, "Desire for, and identification with, the mother can cause evil to spread" (367).

Aware of the fact that she will neither get sexual satisfaction nor conceive a son from her impotent, old husband, Abbie sets about the task of wickedly seducing her young stepson Eben, whom she has found an attractive sex partner. She wickedly persuades him that to him she would be both an affectionate mother and a sensual lover. Through her unparalleled sensuality and coquetry, Abbie succeeds in seducing Eben beyond resistance. Craving for the lost tender love of his mother, and having found her a lusty coquette, Eben accepts Abbie as both his stepmother and bedmate. It is clear that Eben's real motif in cuckolding his stepmother is taking vengeance upon his hard father for both working his mother to death and robbing her of her farm, and satisfying his desire. Thus, vengeance caused by the possible loss of property takes the shape of sexual retribution. In fact, Eben's sexual vengeance upon his father has already taken place when he slept with Minnie, his father's frequently visited prostitute.

The influence of Greek tragedy on the content of *Desire Under the Elms* is clearly manifest, however such influence is charged with a mystical view of the forces at work in and through human

beings (Gelb 539). In their oedipal complex- based deconstructive analysis of the play script of *Desire Under the Elms* Murray and Bowman (1987) argue that although the play's locale is quite American, and is spiritually and emotionally tied to the puritan society, it is deeply rooted in structures found in Greek mythology (4). Murray and Bowman maintain that Eben's desire for his stepmother does not subvert his structuring superego and therefore he becomes a victim to his unconscious oedipal complex (9).

In his article "Myth As Tragic Structure in *Desire Under the Elms*" Edgar Racey (1969) asserts that the play is not based solely on the Greek Hippolytus myth linking Eben with Hippolytus , Abbie with Phaedra and Cabot with Theseus, but is based on this myth along with the Freudian Oedipus complex and the Nietzschean philosophy (5). Racey classifies *Desire Under the Elms* as a New England domestic tragedy since the Cabot family is disintegrated in a time and place when family was supposed to be the backbone of love, solidarity and labor (5). According to Racey, The Cabots' tragedy is the result of a familial structure that could not sustain their sexual and materialistic desires (5). Despite the fact that Cabot did not commit any horrible sins like those committed by his son Eben and his wife Abbie, Racey argues that Cabot is the tragic hero in the play and its main character (95). Newlyn argues that the mutual physical attraction between the son and his stepmother reflects O'Neill's heavy reliance on the classical myths of Oedipus and Phaedra as a raw material for his domestic farm tragedy. *Desire Under the Elms* exploits the Phaedra myth, the Oedipal myth, the division of human consciousness into Apollonian and Dionysian elements, and shows the parallels between Catholicism and the New England Puritanism (Floyd 273-74). Gatta (1979) argues that in *Desire Under the Elms* O'Neill attempted to achieve a kind of fusion of modern psychological drama and tragic history (227).Gatta remarks that much of the behavior of the characters in *Desire Under the Elms* is "motivated by the most elemental sort of sexual and material desire"(230).

Desire Under the Elms is a play that has always been condemned for its obscenity and immorality where incest, adultery, betrayal, Oedipal vengeance, and infanticide are treated so frankly. Despite the ban on the theatrical performance of the play for some time, it was hailed as the first modern American tragedy. Krutch (1952) asserts that passions in *Desire Under the Elms* are powerful enough to create tragedy" (30). Henry (2007) states that the passionate desires of father, stepmother, and son result in "a triangle of tragedy and retribution." The tragic passion, eroticism, the near incest and the guilt they generate culminates in tragic swirls for the Cabot family members (Saur 107) and Krutch (1957) states that *Desire Under the Elms* is merely concerned with portraying an eternal tragedy of man and his passions (94). Naikar argues that Cabot became a tragic figure who negated reason when he neglected his family responsibilities for the sake of fulfilling his excessive instinctive pleasures (128).

Cabot's tragic flaw that has ultimately lead to his downfall and that of all his family members is his excessive greed for property, hypocrisy, the delusion of his faith and his lust for women. Still he remains the play's only tragic figure. Cabot's New England theodicy, as Presley states, gives him a towering tragic stature and an inward reality far greater than that of any other character in the play (27). Like an Aristotelian tragic figure Cabot's downfall is the result of his hubris which not only causes his destruction, but also the ruin of the lives of his sons, new wife and even his former dead wives (Presley 27). Cabot, as Presley notes, is "materially blessed but morally dissolute, blinded by a cage of greed" (25). Ephraim Cabot represents what McVeigh (1990) calls the archetype of the "senex amans" or ridiculous old lover figure of Roman comedy (qtd. in Saur 106). Miller (1965) states that "It is Ephraim's self-delusions that drive his family each to their tragic ends" (44).

Leslie Gerber (1996) argues that Desire Under the Elms is less than tragic and O'Neill does not succeed in elevating his characters to the true tragic stature. Gerber bases his argument on the assumption that Cabot, Abbie and Eben do not qualify as modern tragic figures as they all lack the nobility of mind always associated with a tragic figure. The three major characters in the play are preoccupied in issues that are far from being noble causes. They fight over both sex and property; a fight that ultimately leads to their tragic downfall. On the whole, the characters are pathological rather than tragic. *Desire Under the Elms* is quite tragic since it emphasizes that human attempts at ownership and possession result in pain and inevitable loss (Carpenter 138).

The two elm trees resemble evil that is haunting the Cabots' homestead, and they suggest the

likelihood of the coming misfortune. Evil haunts the Cabots' farmhouse and tempts its dwellers to commit dreadful sins. Cabot is a sinner and though he keeps praying for God to cruse his disobedient sons, he himself is an unbeliever. Cabot, as Hays observes, applies his ostensible fundamentalist virtues to his three sons, but does not apply them to his life for he keeps visiting Minnie in the local brothel (436).The evil haunting the farmhouse tempts both Abbie and Eben to be involved in an incestuous relationship that ultimately brings about the whole farm under the curse of God. The worst sin ever committed in the Cabots' farmhouse is the killing of an innocent defenseless newly-born baby by inhumanely choking it to death with a pillow. Bogard calls the play "a God-oriented tragedy" (225) since it highlights the tragic consequences of violating religious doctrines. A house, under whose roof dreadful sins of incest and infanticide are committed, is doomed to be cursed by God and haunted by evil.

In scene one of Part Two O'Neill designs a pantomimic scene where rhetoric vanishes completely and eroticism engulfs the entire scene to reveal the near incestuous lust that has begun to develop between Abbie and Eben. In this scene, Abbie, wearing a beautiful dress, is sitting in a rocking chair in the porch of the house. She is rocking the chair while she is lost in her erotic thoughts. Eben, without making the slightest noise, sticks his head out of his bedroom window to see who is sitting in the porch. Abbie has sensed Eben's presence though he has made no noise. She stops swinging the rocker and desirously listens to his movement. Though Eben can not see her from behind the window sill, he feels her presence and senses every movement she makes. He obliterates his thoughts of her and contemptuously spits out of the window, then goes back to his bed. Abbie holds her breath and remains motionless in her rocker to hear every sound he makes. She listens attentively with fervent excitement for every movement within the house. Eben comes out on the porch. They stare at each other. He walks cautiously and teasingly in front of her, then he turns away and shuts the door violently. At this gesture, Abbie becomes irritated, looks after him and laughs tantalizingly. Then, Eben resentfully walks past her on the porch towards the path pretending not to see her. Abbie leans forward on the rocker; her eyes sparkle with anger and jeers at him rudely. The silence is broken off and the soundproof pantomimic scene ends when Eben scornfully asks Abbie what makes her giggle, "What air yew cacklin' 'bout?" (*Desire Under the Elms* 341).

In scene two of Part Two the interior of the two rooms on the floor upstairs is shown in full view of the audience simultaneously. In one room Abbie and Cabot are lying in their beds. Cabot is complaining to Abbie that he is extremely lonely and is in need of a companion to understand his lonesomeness. Abbie is inattentive and keeps gazing at the intervening wall that separates her room from that of Eben, "Will ye ever know me- 'r will any man 'r woman? (*Desire Under the Elms* 348). As he receives no reply from his distracted wife, Cabot desperately answers the question himself, "No. I calc'late 't wa'n't t' be" (*Desire Under the Elms* 348).In the adjacent room Eben, dressed in his underwear, is seen loitering impatiently. Abbie ignores Cabot's murmuring and concentrates on following every movement Eben makes in the neighboring room. Having realized that Abbie is ignoring him, Cabot kneels down before her and clutches her knee begging for understanding and true companionship. She remains inattentive to his presence in the room and keeps studying every movement behind the intervening wall with concentrated vigilance. Unable to get his wife's attention, Cabot desperately walks out of the room and goes to the barn.

In the other room, Eben agitatedly stands close to the wall facing Abbie's room and studies it with his piercing eyes. Abbie is aware of Eben's presence behind the wall and keeps looking through it. With concentrated attention Abbie and Eben keep ogling each other through the wall as if it did not exist. Eben makes a robust sigh and Abbie resonates it. Both become exasperatingly weighed down with desire. Unconsciously Eben stretches his arms for Abbie and she half rises as if to embrace him. Then, suddenly, a sense of consciousness infiltrates his mind. Fighting against his contradictory feelings of attraction to and repulsion for Abbie, Eben hurries to his bed, calls down a curse upon himself in an inaudible, feeble voice, covers his head with the pillow and lies motionless on the bed. Burning with desire, Abbie leaves her room instantly and heads towards Eben's room. Eben's incestuous eyes follow every move Abbie makes from the moment she leaves her room to the moment she stands anxiously at the doorstep of his room. Then, the door of his room is opened little by little, and he becomes overwhelmed with thoughts of eroticism when he sees his mother mistress standing in the doorstep and staring at him tantalizingly. Abbie walks up to Eben, with tears of happiness and love overflowing out of her lustful eyes, holds him close to her breast, hugs him and covers his lips with hot kisses. Speechless and overwhelmed with

desire, Eben surrenders himself dumbly to Abbie's wild passion. Then, he holds her neck tight and violently kisses her back, but all of a sudden he becomes repulsive, defiantly pushes her back from him, and springs to his feet in a state of bafflement and excitement. For a while, they stare at each other, flabbergasted and out of breath, gasping like two wild animals in captivity. The silence is broken when Abbie tells Eben that she adores him and undertakes to make him happy "Ye shouldn't, Eben- ye shouldn't – I'd make ye happy!"(*Desire Under the Elms* 351). Eben replies angrily, "I don't want happy – from yew! (*Desire Under the Elms* 351). Having sensed that he is still repulsive against his will, Abbie resorts once again to her art of temptation and says to him, "Waal, I kissed ye anyways- an' ye kissed back- yer lips was burnin' – ye can't lie 'bout that! If ye don't care, why did ye kiss me back – why was yer lips burnin'?"(*Desire Under the Elms* 351).

Still unbelieving that he is molesting his stepmother Eben replies resentfully, "It was like pizen [poison] on 'em. When I kissed ye back, mebbe I thought 'twas someone else" (*Desire Under the Elms* 351). Abbie, outraged, inquires, "Min?" (*Desire Under the Elms* 351). To tease her, Eben replies that he indeed thought he was kissing Minnie. Abbie, with a coquettish, shrill laugh, untruthfully reveals her plan to Eben that she does not love a scrawny man like him, but she wanted to sleep with him for a purpose, " Did ye think I was in love with ye- a weak thin' like yew? Not much! I on'y wanted ye fur a purpose o' my own- an' I'll hev ye fur it yet 'cause I'm stronger'n yew be!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 351). Having sensed that he is still ogling her with fascination and ecstasy, she tauntingly tells him that she is certain that their love is reciprocal and though it has initially started with hot kisses on the lips, it will soon turn into actual sex:

> Ye want me, don't ye? Yes, ye do! Look at yer eyes! They's lust fur me in 'em, burnin' 'em up! Look at yer lips now! They're tremblin' an' longin' t' kiss me, an' yer teeth t' bite! (*Desire Under the Elms* 352).

While Eben is still staring at Abbie with fearsome joy, she reveals to him her intention of seizing the whole house including his mother's parlor which she will occupy tonight with her art of eroticism. With a triumphant laugh, Abbie teases Eben, "They's one room hain't mine yet, but it's a-goin' t' be to-night. I'm a-goin' down now an' light up! Won't ye come courtin' me in the best parlor, Mister Cabot?" (*Desire Under the Elms* 352). Eben angrily warns her not to open the parlor because nobody has dared to open it since the day she died there. Abbie ignores Eben's warning and keeps ogling him to make him submit to her desire. Abbie irresistibly lures Eben into his mother's parlor where she seduces him. Eben helplessly trails along behind Abbie to his mother's parlor where they are involved in their detestable incestuous love affair.

By the time the undeclared, abnormal passion between the coquettish woman and her stepson swells, the ominous and cursed house becomes unbearably cold for the old, cuckolded father who is driven to find solace in the warm barn with the stock. The avenging, maternal sinister spirit that torments Cabot and drives him to the barn is the same driving force that drives Eben and Abbie to the dead mother's parlor to engage in an incestuous love affair. When Abbie and Eben first enter the deserted mother's parlor, both feel the presence of her sinister spirit. Abbie says, "When I first come in--in the dark--they seemed somethin' here" and Eben remarks, "Maw" (*Desire Under the Elms* 353). Haunted by the tormenting memory of his mother and how his father worked her to death on the farm make Eben yearn for the nurturing and protective mother. Therefore, he accepts his stepmother as a substitute for his dead mother on the filial level and as a sex partner to satisfy his desire. Abbie seduces Eben in his mother' parlor to convince him that what she is doing with him comes out of a mother's love for her child, and to achieve her mission of conquering the room which previously belonged to the real owner of the house and the farm. In this context, Abbie embodies a "sinister force, both a nourisher and destroyer (Hartman 361).

To achieve her mission of seducing Eben, Abbie pretends to play his mother's role and thus releases his libido and oedipal love. As a psychiatrist she gradually evokes his dormant feelings and plays on them quite fanatically. Her buxom figure and young age help her a lot in stirring her stepson's libidinous emotional energy. In the mother's shrine, as Hartman states, Abbie confronts and merges with Eben's mother and thus succeeds in seducing her stepson beyond resistance (366). In his mother's parlor Eben is hypnotized by Abbie's intense sensuality and seduction and is unconsciously drawn towards her. Abbie

promises Eben to be his surrogate mother on the filial level and his bedmate on the sexual level. When Abbie inquires, "Tell me about yer Maw, Eben", he replies, "she was kind. She was good". At this point Abbie, making use of Eben's need of maternal love, says "I'll be kind an' good t' ye! (*Desire Under the Elms* 353).

Abbie's sincere maternal affection and wild passion confuse Eben, and he is entrapped in feelings of sexual ecstasy he has never experienced before. Eben continues talking about his mother, "sometimes she used t' sing fur me." (*Desire Under the Elms* 353). At this moment, Abbie coquettishly puts her both arms around Eben and declares her passion to him "I'll sing fur ye! I'll die fur ye!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 354). Overwhelmed by her excessive sensuality and maternal love, Eben childishly sobs bitterly. Abbie keeps manipulating his dormant desire coating it with mother love. She comforts him, "Don't cry, Eben! I'll take yer Maw's place! I'll be everythin' she was t' ye! Let me kiss ye, Eben!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 354).Unable to resist his attractivity, Abbie tenderly draws Eben's head towards her bosom and assures him that she will give him a maternal kiss on his lips, "Don't be afeered! I'll kiss ye pure, Eben--same 's if I was a Maw t' ye" (*Desire Under the Elms* 354). She tells him that he can kiss her back as a son kissing his mother before he goes to bed, "an' ye kin kiss me back 's if yew was my son--my boy--sayin' good-night t' me! Kiss me, Eben" (*Desire Under the Elms* 354). At first, her kisses are quite soft and maternal, then turn into real passion. Unable to avoid her temptation, Eben pretends to resist her wild passion, though deep in his heart he is burning with desire. They kiss, but their kisses far exceed maternal passion. Overcome by intense desire, Abbie kisses Eben lustfully on his lips and he, filled with lust, flings his arms about her and passionately returns her kisses. Despite his overwhelming desire for her, Eben frees himself from the shackles of her lust and pretended mother love, and rises to his feet shaking all over. Trembling as well and agitated with the frenzy of wild passion, Abbie addresses Eben, " Can't ye see it hain't enuf [enough] lovin' ye like a Maw- can't ye see it it's got t' be that an' more – much more- a hundred times more- fur me t' be happy- fur yew t' be happy?" (*Desire Under the Elms* 354).

Eben always looks for excuses and a rational justification for committing the sin of incest. Confused and unable to resist Abbie's temptation any more, Eben pleads to his mother for advice "Maw! What d'ye want? and Abbie, immediately replies, "She's tellin' ye t' love me, Eben" (*Desire Under the Elms* 354). Having persuaded him that his mother's soul will not rest in peace in her grave unless he takes sexual vengeance on his tough father, Eben kneels down in total submission before Abbie, weeping like a child and releases all his love and passion for her, "An' I love yew, Abbie! – now I kin say it! I been dyin' fur want o' ye – every hour- since ye come! I love ye!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 355).

Eben mistakenly believes that the spirit of his mother approves of his relationship with Abbie. He perceives such abnormal passion as retribution on Cabot for his cruelty to his dead mother .He says to Abbie, "I see it! I see why. It's her vengeance on him--so's she can rest quiet in her grave!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 355). Having enjoyed the favors of his stepmother in the absence of his detestable father, Eben is also satisfied with the retributive nature of his love affair. The next morning Eben sees his ignorant father he teasingly remarks to him, "Yew 'n' me is quits. Let's shake hands" (*Desire Under the Elms* 356).Eben fails to understand that in committing the sin of incest, he not only takes vengeance upon his father by fathering a child by his step-mother, but he also inflicts self-ruin upon himself, ravishes his step-mother, causes the death of his own illegitimate child and commits a great sin disapproved of by God and society. The death of his mother while he is still a small boy has made Eben relive his lost childhood with the substitution mother. Eben's indifference to his father's puritan faith and his violation of its social norms not only constitutes the young man's defiance to social norms prescribed by god and practiced by faithful believers, but stresses what Presley describes as the elder generation's "inability to generate a faith" in the new generation (2).

On more than on occasion, Abbie uses diction heavily loaded with sexual connotations to entrap her stepson. When Eben informs Abbie that his father was negligent of his mother "He couldn't 'preciate her", Abbie plays on words, "He can't 'preciate me!" (Desire Under the Elms 354). Abbie wants to say that Cabot does not appreciate her beauty and youth implying at once that she lacks sexual gratification from an old husband and is in need of a young man who would appreciate her youth and intense lust. Inattentive to what she said, Eben accuses his father of murdering his mother by working her to death on the farm, "He murdered her with his hardness." And once again, Abbie plays on words and uses implied

erotic diction, "He's murderin' me!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 354). Abbie asserts that the impotent old husband has killed her metaphorically by not satisfying her sexual desire. Frenzied by a burning desire, Abbie walks up towards Eben twisting her body desirously, and directly arouses his sexual desire by using words heavily loaded with sexual connotations:

> Hain't the sun strong an' hot? Ye kin feel it burnin' into the earth-Nature-makin' thin's grow- bigger 'n' bigger- burnin' inside ye- makin' ye want t' grow-into somethin' else-till ye're jined with it-an' makes ye grow bigger- like a tree- like them elums (*Desire Under the Elms* 342).

It is clear that the hot sun that is burning the earth and makes trees grow bigger and bigger, the tree that grows inside Eben as a result of the lust that is eating his heart until it reaches the top of the two tall elm trees are all words that are coated with sexual connotations.

In scene one of Part Three O'Neill designs a third pantomimic scene to divulge the secret passion between the mother mistress and the son lover. The interior of the two rooms on the second floor and the kitchen are shown simultaneously. In his bedroom Eben is sitting on the side of his bed desperately fighting against his conflicting feelings towards Abbie. In the next room a cradle is positioned beside the double bed. In the kitchen downstairs merry makers are cheerfully dancing to the joyous fiddle music and are gossiping. Ephraim has invited country folks from the neighboring farms to attend a festive party in honor of his alleged newly born son from Abbie. The peasants and their wives are gossiping that Cabot's assumed son is in fact Eben's. Ignorant of their gossip, Cabot remains in a state of comical excitement amounted by the large amount of liquor he has gulped. He pays no attention to their insinuations and outdances them all.

In the kitchen's left corner, Abbie is sitting in a rocking chair intensely lost in her thoughts and unmindful of her surroundings. She is inattentive to the gossiping of the merry makers and has turned a deaf ear to the loud fiddle music played fanatically by the young fiddler as if she were sitting by herself in a vacant room. She is speechless, unmoving and morose. In anticipation of Eben to come, her anxious eyes keep gazing at the door. At this moment, Eben leaves his room and enters Abbie's room. He moves cautiously towards the cradle and stands there tenderly contemplating his child with admiration. Abbie is aware of Eben's presence in her room upstairs, and immediately hurries to meet him. She stands in the doorway of her room and looks amorously at Eben, who is still admiringly looking down at his son in the cradle. She walks up to him and gives him a big hug. They kiss and affectionately bend over the cradle touching the baby tenderly.

Having been misleadingly informed by Cabot that Abbie has asked him to cast him off the farm, and having realized that she has played with his emotions for the purpose of taking hold on the farm, Eben becomes petrified with rage and insults her describing her as a roguish whore:

> I do hate ye! Ye're a whore- a damn trickin' whore! Ye're nothin' but a stinkin' passel o' lies! …Ye've kept sayin' ye loved me… Ye've made a fool o' me – a sick, dumb fool-a purpose! …They must be a devil livin' in ye! 'Tain't human t' be as bad as that be! (*Desire Under the Elms* 366).

Though late, Abbie realizes that her relationship with her stepson far exceeds the physical attraction to the state of idolatrous love. To prove her love to her son-sex partner, Abbie, the mother-mistress, hysterically and mercilessly smothers her baby in its cradle reflecting at once the myth of Medea. However, unlike Medea who murders her children to avenge her unfaithful husband, Abbie chokes her child to death in the elated hope to regain the seemingly lost love of her sex partner. Having smothered the child, Abbie, on the verge of hysteria, addresses her stepson lover, "I done it, Eben! I told ye I'd do it! I've proved I love ye –better'n everythin'- so's ye can't never doubt me no more" (*Desire Under the Elms* 369). At first, Eben became excited as he mistakenly thought that Abbie killed his father. He tells her that the old man deserved to be killed "An' serves him right", and he immediately suggests that they would tell the sheriff that the old man died of excessive drinking," But we got t' do somethin' quick t' make it look s'if the old skunk'd killed himself when he was drunk. We kin prove by 'em all how drunk he got" (*Desire Under the Elms* 370). Eben becomes furious when Abbie tells him that she killed the child not his father. Horror-struck by her cold-blooded murder of an innocent, powerless child, Eben

cries out calling his mother's spirit, "Maw, whar was ye, why didn't ye stop her?" (*Desire Under the Elms* 370). Abbie calmly says to him, "She went back t'her grave that night we first done it, remember? I hain't felt her about since" (*Desire Under the Elms* 370). Appalled by her carelessness, Eben harshly scolds Abbie, "Ye must 've swapped yer soul t' hell" (*Desire Under the Elms* 371), runs out of the house in a state of disbelief and rage, and goes to the Sheriff's office to report the murder.

After further consideration, Eben becomes aware that Abbie murdered the child to show beyond doubt that her love for him is genuine, and that she did not cheat him out of his inheritance of the farm as he thought. He goes back to the farm, throws himself on his knees before Abbie, cuddles her, and starts sobbing bitterly in her lap. Eben tries to convince Abbie to escape with him from the farm, but she refuses to do so and expresses her willingness to face her punishment for committing such a dreadful crime. Eben, with his head still resting on her breast, declares his love for Abbie and begs for forgiveness for not understanding her, "I love ye! Forgive me!". Abbie presses his head tightly against her breast and grants him forgiveness, "I'd forgive ye all the sins in hell fur sayin' that!" (*Desire Under the Elms* 374-75).

As with regards to language, the characters' dramatic discourse is realistic, colloquial and teems with weird abbreviations and grammatical distortions. Their dialogue, in terms of both syntax and diction, is hesitant, telegraphic and incoherent. By and large, modern American dramatists have been disparagingly criticized of degenerating dramatic dialogue by peopling the stage with characters that speak a colloquial language with hardly readable, clipped words and structurally distorted sentences. In an essay entitled "Why American Plays Are Not Literature" Robert Brustein accuses modern American dramatists of inarticulacy and criticizes them all for their indifference to the conventions of grammar. Such dramatists, Brustein argues, have written hardly readable plays and have been embarrassed when their plays were published in print (250). Brustein states that the language of modern American plays lacks the artistry associated with that of closet dramas (251). American plays, Brustein maintains, are difficult to read and often give little sense when read in one's study (251). Brustein sympathizes with readers who find such plays hardly readable as they "stumble on inconsistencies, disharmonies, and contradictions which are sometimes ignored in the rapid excitement of performance" (251). Brustein's harsh disparagement of American playwrights' dramatic dialogue becomes obvious when he confirms that such playwrights use lengthy stage directions and parenthetical sentences to make clear points which have not been appropriately dramatized and to hide the flaws of their characters' murky language (251). O'Neill, specifically, has been criticized of filling his drama with exhaustive stage directions at the expense of dramatic dialogue to conceal the flaws of his characters' inarticulacy (Brustein 251). In contemporary dramaturgy this heavy reliance on lengthy stage directions to express the characters' inner thoughts has many shortcomings, the most hazardous of which is minimizing the characters' dialogue. However, in a drama about secret passion and incest such minimal character talk serves the purpose of concentrating on eroticism rather than on rhetoric.

Modern American dramatists rebut such groundless criticism and advise their readers to ignore the literary failings in the play script and take pleasure in the unconventional theatrical styles in which their dramatic dialogue is wrapped. Elmer Rice affirms, "Literary excellence is not an essential criterion in the evaluation of a play" (qtd. in Brustein, 250). Even though the dramatic dialogue of modern American drama is colloquial, such conversational language is rendered poetic through "nuance, atmosphere and mood" which can be simply provoked by unrealistic poetic lighting and expressionistic music (Gassner *Theater at the Crossroads* 19).

The characters' dramatic dialogue in *Desire Under the Elms* reflects the dialect of American country folk people. The printed version of this rural dialect is difficult to read and understand since it is replete with hardly discernible abbreviations and structurally ill-formed sentences. Some words are distorted to the degree that they are difficult to identify and the sentences seem not easy to comprehend. Literary critics have always disapproved of O'Neill's dramatic dialogue criticizing it of being powerless and incapable of reflecting the dramatic level of the tragedy his characters undergo. Brustein comments:

Most of our playwrights, including our greatest, Eugene O'Neill, are charter members of a cult of inarticulacy, communicating high moments of thought and feeling not through speech but through dashes and exclamation points (250).

Gassner in "Realism in the Modern American Theater" does not hesitate to assert that O'Neill's defect in all his plays whether they are realistic or expressionistic is the lack of an elated language usually associated with classical drama. Gassner writes: In neither the preponderantly naturalistic nor expressionistic plays is the realism devoid of poetry or the poetry devoid of realism. And O'Neill's particular defect is the same in both styles of theater-namely, a want of language (17).

Nevertheless, O'Neill's dramatic discourse can be viewed from a different standpoint. It is functional, realistic, and practical. Gassner (1967) argues that the deficient dramatic dialogue of O'Neill's characters suits their time, place and social background (17). Bigsby commends O'Neill's colloquialism when he indicated that O'Neill deliberately "made inarticulateness an aesthetic instrument of some subtlety"(149) and Eileen Miller defends O'Neill's vernacular dramatic dialogue against callous critiques publicized by critics such as Eric Bentley and Ruby Cohn who have condemned O'Neill's dramatic dialogue for being "linguistically overdone, crudely overt and remote." (2004.eOneill.com).

Despite the fact that O'Neill's dramatic language is colloquial, replete with distorted, familiar words beyond recognition and grammatically incorrect statements, the dramatic discourse is transformed into a sophisticated rhetoric in the scenes where Cabot makes allusions to the Bible. Presley seems to agree with this point when he remarked that Desire *Under the Elms* "presents a more sophisticated rhetoric regarding religion than do other O'Neill plays" (26). Henry (2007) argues that O'Neill's use of language is masterful; the Yankee words and phrases such as "Ayeh," "purty," and "I love ye" and the biblical passages spoken by Ephraim, arise naturally but effectively from the characters. Cabot's love of the land and the stock, his awareness of its beauty, and his need for companionship and understanding infuse the play with poetry and elevate it above the level of simple realism into poignant tragedy.

Although *Desire Under the Elms* is a rural tragedy, its language is not elated and pleasurable like that of a classic tragedy. A deconstruction of the text of the play, Murray and Bowman state, would prove that the dramatic dialogue of the play is inadequate and incapable of containing the irrational the language of any classic tragedy would achieve (7). According to Murray and Bowman, the characters' language is "the text's unsaid and its unsayable" (7). However, some dramatic dialogues are quite poetic despite their colloquialism. In an essay entitled "Extreme O'Neill" Connors praises O'Neill's prolix language and describes it as a vehicle for enveloping the extravagant plots and psychological formalism that owed much to Greek drama (22), and Cohn asserts that O'Neill was "the first American playwright whose dialogue gave his audience a feeling of observed life rather than books read" (qtd. in Raleigh 174).

Bogard states that O'Neill had an ear for the vagaries of speech, especially in the marked forms of the dialect" (43). However, O'Neill's colloquial dramatic discourse , Bogard maintains, possesses a poetic impulse that reveals itself not in the words themselves, but rather in stage images created by lighting and patterns of sound" (qtd. in Voelker 214). The tragic action in *Desire Under the Elms* is reinforced by an alternation of the rhythm of the dramatic dialogue from long, expository speeches uttered by Ephraim Cabot to the short and clipped phrases of Abbie and Eben said while entrapped in their sexual ecstasy. However, the dramatic dialogue of the two incestuous lovers is far from being poetic and is rendered inarticulate under the influence of their intense lust.

Dramatic discourse decreases in moments of intensified sexual encounter between the son-lover and the mistress-mother. Bentley (2000) states that O'Neill's sense of theatrical form is "frustrated by an eloquence that decays into mere repetitious garrulousness." In *The Discovery of Drama* Thomas E. Sanders (1968) classifies *Desire Under the Elms* as a folk drama written in a rural dialect, peopled by humble farmers and set in the distinct subculture of puritan New England (qtd. in Saur 104). Sanders labels the play as a "modern tragedy," and links it with such luminaries as Sophocles and Shakespeare despite its want of elated language.

Despite the fact that Abbie and Eben's love affair is incestuous, the two lovers neither feel ashamed of such a relationship nor do they regret having committed such a dreadful sin. Though Abbie declares her guilt of murdering the child, she does not repent having committed the sin of incest because she believed that she did it for the man she loved. Abbie asserts, "I don't repent that sin! I hain't askin' God t' fergive that!", and Eben reiterates that he does not repent the sin either "Nor me" (*Desire Under the Elms* 375). Following the infanticide, both Abbie and Eben strongly declare their own love and Eben asserts

his eagerness to share Abbie whatever punishment she might face. Abbie declares her guilt, and confesses that she deserves to be punished when she says, “I got t' take my punishment--t' pay fur my sin”, and Eben expresses his willingness to share the punishment “Then I want t' share it with ye” (*Desire Under the Elms* 375). Abbie tries to convince Eben that he did nothing wrong, but he insists on sharing the punishment for being her accomplice in the murder. When Abbie says, “Ye didn't do nothin'”, Eben replies, “I put it in yer head. I wisht he was dead! I as much as urged ye t' do it! ... I'm as guilty as yew be! He was the child o' our sin” (*Desire Under the Elms* 375). Eben expresses his willingness to share the responsibility, “I got t' pay fur my part o' the sin”, but feels disgusted at Abbie’s suffocation of the innocent child “but it led up t' the other--an' the murder ye did, ye did 'count o' me--an' it's my murder, too, I'll tell the Sheriff--an' if ye deny it, I'll say we planned it t'gether” (*Desire Under the Elms* 375). Shaughnessy (1996) argues that Abbie and Eben "acknowledge the gravity of their sin and therewith accept their punishment as just (101). In the scene in which the two lovers accept their punishment, though for killing the child not for committing the sin of incest, Shaughnessy remarks, "we hear echoes of Greek tragedy, but we also recognize familiar Christian strains" (101). Hays (1990) asserts that O’Neill uses child murder as a brutal plot device and as a gruesome and painful symbol of the sacrifice of an extension of self which leads to unnatural development in the plot (435). Cabot lusts for companionship and a son to whom he wishes to pass the farm on an extension of himself.

Of the four categories of guilt in literature : private guilt, shared guilt, public guilt and implied guilt Brown labels guilt in *Desire Under the Elms* as shared guilt in which Abbie and Eben share the same guilt because of the need of one another for assurance and assistance (8). Their abnormal passion has indeed led to tragic consequences. However, as a result of committing the horrible crimes of incest and infanticide Eben and Abbie will live forever as sexual and social outcasts. They will never be respected in the community where they live, and they will always live under the curse of the crimes they committed, for evil means and deeds always result in evil ends.

It is ironical that Abbie in killing the child was thinking that she, as Ditsky puts it, was sacrificing a future generation to ensure the present sensual enjoyment with her lover (qtd. in Hays 436). To prove her genuine love for Eben and to enjoy his crimson love, Abbie murdered the child. However, she did not know that in killing the child, she would be sent to jail, and would therefore no more enjoy her present love. It is also ironical on the part of Eben when he sacrifices his own youth which he would spend in prison for Abbie mistakenly believing that in sharing the guilt with her, he would join her in prison. He failed to realize that both would be sent to different prisons and might both be hanged. Their sacrifice is hopeless and their crimes are so tragic and beyond repentance. Hays assert that Eben’s sexual development is stunted and is not expressed naturally for incest is not natural sexual growth (436). This perversion of normal, healthy sexuality, Hays maintains, is the result of Cabot’s stonyhearted Calvinism and opinionated solipsism which lead to the tragic sins of infanticide and incest (436).

The multiple conflicts in *Desire Under the Elms* are diabolical. They are triggered by jealousy, hatred, revenge, sex and betrayal. The dramatic intensification of every conflict in the play, Hartman notes, is almost diabolical culminating into tragic consequences (363). Eben is betrayed by his step-mother mistress into begetting Cabot’s son who would finally disinherit him. Cabot is also betrayed by his young wife by cuckolding him with his own son. Hartman argues that the conflict between Eben and his father arises from both incestuous desire and incestuous hatred (367). Cabot hates Eben and feels jealous of him because he is young, handsome and spiteful of him. Eben hates his father because he worked his mother to death on the farm and deprived him and his half brothers of their legal inheritance of the farm.

O’Neill revived and redefined Greek tragedy by utilizing Freudian and Jungian psychology mixing them with some elements of Greek and American mythology. In a letter he wrote to Barrett Clark, O’Neill writes, "Perhaps I can explain the nature of my feeling for the impelling, inscrutable forces behind life which it is my ambition to at least faintly shadow at their work in my plays" (qtd. in Cargill et. al. 100).The forces behind life O’Neill strives to shed light on in *Desire Under the Elms* are unconscious and subconscious psychic forces continually at work within the principal characters in the play. Sanders argues that in *Desire Under the Elms* O’Neill succeeded in updating Aristotle’s concept of “limited catharsis” and “tragic waste of man's potential when it is misdirected by passion” (qtd. in Saur 105). Sanders argues that the reason why O'Neill extracted dramatic elements from the *Medea* and the

Hippolytus myth is to arouse pity and fear originally linked with Greek tragedies, and to illuminate man's tragic flaws that ultimately lead to his own ruin.(qtd. in Saur 106).

Binary oppositions or polarities permeate throughout the entire text of *Desire Under the Elms*; love and hatred, attraction and repulsion, desire and murder, incest and faith, and softness and hardness. However, the most dominant polarity, Nolan (1981) points out, in the play is that of the Jungian archetypes of the feminine anima and masculine animus or soft and hard. The behind life forces, represented by the conflicting energies of the anima and animus O'Neill strives to unravel in the play, constitute the tragic force that drives the principal characters to tragic consequences. Nolan (1981) likens this O'Neillian tragic force to fate and the hostile gods in Greek tragedy. According to Nolan, the archetypal instincts of the anima and animus and the Freudian pleasure principle govern much of human behavior. In this context, much of Eben and Abbie's behavior is controlled by the anima, while much of Ephraim Cabot's behavior is directed by the animus and his greed for property.

The Cabots feel the presence of an evil spirit in the house, but fail to understand the mysterious nature of such a spirit. They fail to unravel the mystery that drives them to their ominous ends. George Steiner (1961) argues that what makes the tragic circumstances the tragic figure experiences unbearable is the fact that they are "inexplicable" (128) and that the forces which destroy him "can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence" (8). Richmond Hathorn (1962) argues that the core element in a tragedy is "the revelation of a mystery" (223) and that is what the Cabots could not achieve. Cabot can feel the curse, but does not know what it is and why it is permeating the farmhouse. Even during the merry making scene, he can feel the presence of evil dominating the entire house. Cabot murmurs in the yard,

> Even the music can't drive it out--somethin'. Ye kin feel it droppin' off the elums, climbin' up the roof, sneakin' down the chimney, pokin' in the corners! They's no peace in houses, they's no rest livin' with folks. Somethin's always livin' with ye (*Desire Under the Elms* 363).

Cabot sees through his wife's betrayal and adultery and that is why he repeatedly tells her that he feels that the house is cold even when it is burning hot outside. When Abbie, contemptuously, promises Cabot to bear a son from him, he sees through her deception and betrayal, starts to shake all over and unintentionally discloses his fears of her, "You give me chills sometimes. (*He shivers*). It's cold in this house. It's oneasy" (*Desire Under the Elms* 350). Having discovered his wife's infidelity with his own son and having known that the baby was not his son but that of Eben, Cabot says to Abbie, "That was it--what I felt--pokin' around the corners...I felt they was somethin' onnateral--somewhars--the house got so lonesome--an' cold--drivin' me down to the barn--t'the beasts o' the field" (*Desire Under the Elms* 373). In such a context Cabot qualifies as a tragic figure in the modern sense of the word. Richard Sewell (1959) states that tragedy "sees man as a questioner, naked, unaccommodated, alone, facing mysterious, demonic forces in his own nature and outside" (4-5).

In *Desire Under the Elms* O'Neill depicts desire as a dominant force that stands in the core of the human nature. Fred Niblo called *Desire Under the Elms* the "most morbid plumbing of the depths to which human nature can sink"(eOneill.com).Desire is part of nature which is portrayed as an abiding absolute throughout the play (Carpenter 109).The play abounds with references to nature, and the characters express their admiration of nature on several occasions. The Cabots' farmhouse is towered by two elm trees that reflect the image of Eben's dead mother and the entire protective feminine spirit that hovers over and redeems the Cabot farm from its hard masculine rocks (Going 386). In this context, desire, the mother and nature are seen as one entity reflecting the three constituent elements collectively.

Abbie describes Eben's repulsion in terms of nature imagery. She tries to convince him that his passion for her is instinctive, and suppressing such a passion is against nature. Restraining such passion is impossible in the same way one can not suppress the growth of the two elms leaning on the farmhouse. Gatta argues that all the characters in the play have one common tragic flaw which ultimately leads to their self-inflicted ruin and moral failure (232). Cabot is enslaved by the baser demands of his bestial instincts and the dream to possess the farm for ever, and Abbie and Eben are lost in a cursed, incestuous love affair.

O'Neill describes the intense sensuality the Cabot farmhouse is teemed with in terms of animal imagery. O'Neill likens Eben with a wild animal to show his strong sensuality and animalistic lust, "His defiant dark eyes remind one of a wild animal's in captivity. Each day is a cage in which he finds himself trapped" (*Desire Under the Elms* 319). Eben is also described as is a "prize bull", a "calf," and a "prize rooster". In scenes of bestial intensified sensuality Eben and Abbie are portrayed as two animals panting after lust and desire. At first, the two lovers are sexually attracted to each other, and desire seems to sink to a lower level; to that of beasts copulating rather than two lovers making love with affection. Their first sexual intercourse is mixed with feelings of reciprocal hatred, repulsion and breaking of wills, but their bestial, sexual intimacy is not affected by such trivial feelings. O'Neill concedes that New England was far from being stereotyped as the new Eden for the puritans, but rather it was disapprovingly depicted as a land of hypocritical faith and greed for property.

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